

Hearing Statement of Chairman Joe Barton
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet
“Public Safety Communications from 9/11 to Katrina:
Critical Public Policy Lessons”
September 29, 2005

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing today on public safety communications. The United States has seen some catastrophic events in the last five years that tested our crisis communications. Each time a crisis arrives, the first casualty seems to be the system that permits firefighters and police to communicate. Today we examine the progress being made to ensure that when the next crisis occurs, the emergency communications systems actually work.

Most recently, the collapse of communications occurred in New Orleans while thousands of people found themselves stranded at the New Orleans Convention Center. How much progress has been made since the September 11th terrorist attacks exposed

major gaps in communications among federal, state and local officials more than four years ago? Not much, it seems.

On September 11, 1996, five years to the day before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Public Safety Wireless Advisory Committee released a report which stated that “unless immediate measures are taken to alleviate spectrum shortfall and promote interoperability, public safety will not be able to adequately discharge their obligation to protect life and property in a safe, efficient, and cost effective manner.” And yet here we are and public safety is still grappling with inadequate spectrum and radios that do not communicate with one another. What I want to learn today is this: what on earth does Congress need to do to make sure public safety officials and first responders can talk to each other?

I already know that a big part of the answer is spectrum. I have spent months working on a bill to enact a hard date for the

digital television transition so that the broadcasters will return spectrum in the upper 700 MHz band that Congress promised to public safety in 1997. With this spectrum, first responders across the nation could share common channels on which multiple local, state, and federal agencies could coordinate emergency response. We should not wait for another terrorist attack or natural disaster to remind us of the importance of giving public safety the tools they need to do their job.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing. I look forward to working with you to ensure that this Committee does everything it can to ensure that first responders achieve communications interoperability.